

Searching for Nirvana by nightmareyes

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“Who’s so important that they can’t wait until after we’re finished, Richie?”

Richie grinned, glancing at the name *Eds* lighting up his phone screen. “I’ll have you know, it’s my –”

Suddenly, his voice cut off involuntarily with a pang in the pit of his stomach. He realized immediately that he’d never told these guys about Eddie before. Fuck, they didn’t even know that Richie was gay.

Just say it. Say that it’s your boyfriend.

Richie felt his pulse pick up and his hands begin to sweat. *Say it.*

“It’s my, uh –”

Boyfriend. My boyfriend.

“Roommate,” he finished weakly.

Richie “Trashmouth” Tozier has it all: a sold-out national tour, a multi-million dollar Netflix deal, a fan base that still supports him months after his highly publicized mental breakdown, and a boyfriend named Eddie Kaspbrak, who had been the love of his life ever since he was in middle school. It’s just that, after a childhood of being tormented for his sexuality, that last part wasn’t always easy to talk about. But Richie is more than determined to change that.

Searching for Nirvana

Author's Note:

Hello!! Thank you as always for checking out my fic!

I tried to strike a balance in the description between laying out the central premise for this fic and describing the tone – which was actually shockingly difficult! The subject matter sounds kind of bleak, but trust me, the story is a lot more lighthearted than it sounds (and there are a lot of fluffy moments).

This fic was inspired by the fact that, even once you get past the big, scary part of coming out for the first time, you never stop having to come out to random people you meet, like your Uber driver or friends that you haven't seen in years. I've had the idea for a fic kind of like this one for a really long time, but it wasn't until I got to know Richie as a character that I was really inspired to write it! I'm just really into portraying Richie dealing with his issues in a healthy way, okay!!!

The title is from “demons” by Hayley Kiyoko, but this fic may have been more aptly titled by the line almost right after this one – “don't bother me, my misery – it's holding me, won't let me speak.”

That's pretty much it! I really hope that you enjoy it!
:)

An incredibly bizarre thing had just happened.

It wasn't something that was blatantly, outwardly strange to any outside observer – Richie hadn't had an outburst or an allergic reaction or admitted that he thought that the Star Wars prequels *weren't that bad* – nothing like that. It also hadn't had anything to do with the resurgence of a certain, supernatural alien-clown; he and his friends had slain it a few months back, for *good* this time, thank you

very much.

It was more subtle – unsettling in a way that may have only been immediately evident to Richie.

Here's what had gone down:

Richie had been working on the finishing sketch for his newest tour and Netflix Original Special – which had been aptly titled *Breakdown* in honor of what had been, at least to the public, Richie's very own Britney-Spears-in-2007 moment. As outsiders, all that spectators had seen was Richie having a freak-out on stage, leaving halfway through a show, cancelling an entire leg of his national tour, screaming at a little kid in public, and thoroughly destroying the party room of a Chinese restaurant in fucking Nowhere, Maine.

They had no knowledge of the aforementioned supernatural alien-clown who had been responsible for all of that shit, of course. To them, it was just *Trashmouth Tozier losing his fucking mind*.

The tabloids had a field day with it, speculating about everything from Richie having an alleged drug addiction and overdosing on heroin to contracting terminal cancer with six months to live. One of them had claimed he disappeared because he'd been a witness to a string of mafia-related activities, and that he was either in the witness protection program or dead at the bottom of the ocean.

After seeing that one, Richie had enough and tweeted, “reading your article made me wish i were actually dead at the bottom of the ocean, so thanks for that”

It had been his first public “appearance” in well over two months.

TrashieRichmouth05 (@TmouthRT3x) had called his comeback “honestly iconic,” so Richie thought he was probably doing pretty well for himself.

That assumption was proven to be correct when, after all of that radio silence, he finally announced his new tour: tickets had sold out in a matter of hours, and there were entire websites with scalper-bots selling them for hundreds of dollars more than they'd retailed for.

Netflix had almost immediately jumped at the opportunity to add Richie to their repertoire of headliners. They wrote him an offer with so many zeroes that Richie couldn't possibly refuse – though he probably wouldn't have anyway, but they didn't need to know that.

The tour kicked off in two and a half weeks, which made it even more anxiety-inducing that the show's big ending, it's *farewell piece* wasn't completely signed, sealed, and delivered.

Or, at least, it was anxiety-inducing for the producers. And his co-writers. And the tech staff and the camera crew. Richie himself didn't feel particularly bothered. He knew that it would get finished eventually, and realistically, this crowd was eating out of the palm of his hands – to the extent where it didn't even *matter* if the show was perfect. Richie couldn't remember the last time that he'd had a group of people so entranced and concerned with what he had to say.

It was almost touching.

Almost, because he couldn't fully focus on it with the rest of the writer's room up his fucking ass.

"Richie, man," said *Aaron*, a twenty-two year old who was always wearing a beanie, ridiculously tight jeans, and *ironic* graphic t-shirts with pictures of, like, thumbtacks or toast with smiley faces on them. He was responsible for keeping Richie's work in touch with *millennial humor*, which was something that Richie wanted to gag just thinking about. "We need to get this fucking sorted."

"Aaron, vibe check?" Richie said, proudly utilizing some slang that he read on Twitter. "You need to take a fucking pill."

"He's right, Rich," said Dave – Richie's manager, who was basically only sitting in to make sure that nothing that they'd written was overly offensive or would get Richie *cancelled* on Twitter (whatever the fuck that meant). Otherwise, his goal could not have been more detached from the creative element of things; his job essentially amounted to marketing this shit and making as much money as he possibly could – for Richie or for himself, Richie wasn't entirely sure. "We need to get this show on the road – literally. You're gonna be leaving for the tour in a matter of fucking days. This needs to be

polished off.”

Richie was starting to regret insisting that he play a bigger hand in the writing process. He was proud of the material that he'd written – almost the entire show was his own shit, with only a few lines and tweaks adjusted by the rest of his colleagues. And it showed: it was much better than any of the stuff that he used to perform, way fucking funnier, and when he practiced it in the mirror, it rolled off of his tongue like something that he'd actually say as opposed to lines that he'd memorized.

Still, he wanted to do this *right*, and you couldn't rush this sort of thing. He wasn't just in it for the money anymore, and the fucking drones staring back at him made him feel claustrophobic.

Looking over at the rest of the room, though, Richie decided that he'd needed to relent, at least a little bit. He saw Jackson, another cowriter, who was the cool forty-something of the group and had tons of experience in the industry. He was the only person in the room that Richie had thought was actually fucking funny, and he typically looked unrelentingly chill – but now he was staring at Richie intently with a vaguely red complexion and eyes that screamed *murder*.

“Fine,” Richie sighed, rubbing his temples with the pads of his fingers exasperatedly. “You wanna do this? Then let's fucking do this. Where were we?”

Dave nodded curtly and said, “Excellent, Richie. That's great. We were just discussing the bit about your first erection. As we were saying, you described it as –” He was cut off abruptly when somebody's cell phone started ringing. “Damn it, guys, who's phone is that? You know we're not supposed to have phones in here while we're working.”

Nobody said anything, just looked around the table suspiciously waiting for the perpetrator to stand up and announce themselves. It took Richie longer than it probably should have to realize that the sound was coming from his front pocket.

“Sorry, amigos,” he said, taking out his phone and seeing the name

Eds light up his screen. Richie smiled at it involuntarily. “That’s my bad. I should probably take this.”

He was standing up when Aaron asked, “Who the fuck could be that important that it can’t wait until after we’re finished, Richie?”

Richie stared back at him challengingly, wanting nothing more than the opportunity to finally put that little caramel-macchiato-drinking-hipster-douchebag in his place once and for all. “I’ll have you know, it’s my –”

Suddenly, Richie’s voice cut off involuntarily with a *pang* in the pit of his stomach. He realized immediately that he’d never told these guys about Eddie before. Fuck, they didn’t even know that Richie was gay.

Just say it. Say that it’s your boyfriend.

Richie felt his pulse pick up and his hands begin to sweat. *Say it.*

In a moment, with the rest of the room staring back at him expectantly, Richie was hit with some vivid memories.

It’s middle school. Henry Bowers is knocking Richie’s lunch tray out of his hands in front of the entire cafeteria, right after screaming in his face that he was a “*Faggot!*” Everybody was staring at him – was looking and wondering if it were true.

It’s high school, and the same word is scrawled sloppily on the front of his locker, but it’s still unmistakable. It was the talk of everyone in his classes for the next few days, and Richie had felt their eyes burning holes in the back of his head. Of course, everybody had known that the locker belonged to him. His homeroom teacher had scolded him in front of the class, accused him of defacing his own locker, thought he was just trying to be funny. She made him clean it himself, and everybody watched him then, too.

Just say it!

It’s a few months ago, and Pennywise is taunting him in the park. *Everybody knows your secret, Richie*, he’d said. How was that more terrifying than the fact that his life had literally been in danger? Even without the image of Paul Bunyan chasing after him as a kid, with his

sharp teeth and evil eyes and ready to kill Richie without a second thought, Richie had never felt more afraid. *They can't know*. Because if they knew, then what? He couldn't hide anymore. He was completely vulnerable.

Richie felt as a distinct and wretched fear, *terror* wracked through his body.

"It's my, uh –"

Boyfriend. My boyfriend.

"Roommate," he finished weakly.

"Your roommate?" Aaron asked, scrunching his nose. Richie thought it made him look like even more of a petulant toddler than usual. "The fuck do you need to talk to your roommate for?"

Richie fired back immediately, "He's calling me back with the results of your mom's pregnancy test. I think I might have knocked her up."

"Jesus, real fucking mature –" Aaron called out, but Richie had gotten up and stumbled out of the room before he could hear the rest of the sentence.

He answered the phone as soon as he got out into the hallway, feeling his hands still shaking.

"Eds, hey. What's up?"

"Nothing really. I just thought that maybe you could use a little break," Eddie said on the other end. Of course – Richie had complained to Eddie just a few hours earlier about how brutal that these writing sessions could be, and he was thankful that Eddie took it upon himself to offer a distraction. "Is this a bad time?"

"Not at all," Richie said, trying to keep his voice steady. "Trust me."

"Is everything okay?" Eddie asked. Richie couldn't fully tell over the phone, but he thought that Eddie may have sounded genuinely concerned – which was the last thing that Richie wanted.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. It’s just – it’s just,” he couldn’t think of the right words to say that wouldn’t make him sound like he was losing it. “It’s a lot. Everything is, I guess. I’m really stressed out, and everyone’s pissed at me because the set isn’t finished, and fucking Aaron is being a little snot as usual.”

“I fucking hate Aaron,” Eddie agreed. He’d never actually met Aaron, but Richie had complained about him numerous times, complete with obnoxious (and spot-on) impressions. “Tell him to fuck off.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I should,” Richie sighed.

“Seriously, Rich,” Eddie said softly. “You sound really off.”

“I’m fine, really,” Richie said, heart still thudding and not feeling fine in the slightest. “Do you think you could just, um – like, tell me about your day? Or something?”

“Tell you about my day?” It was a bit of a strange request out of the blue, Richie thought, but he thought that it may have been able to get his mind off of what had just happened.

“Yeah, like, just all the shit you did and stuff.”

“I mean I know what telling you about my day *means*, I just –“

“Actually, never mind,” Richie said, suddenly feeling embarrassed. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Richie –“

“Seriously.”

“No, fuck you, I’m telling you about my day and you’re going to listen whether you like it or not,” Eddie said, using an obnoxious voice that Richie thought that he may have loved more than anything in the world. “I’ve got a really great story about this asshole who cut me off on the way to work today.”

Richie stayed out in the hallway listening to Eddie talk for what felt like close to an hour. He was surely irritating the fuck out of the rest of the writer’s room, but Richie couldn’t bring himself to care. He

stayed with Eddie until his pulse calmed down and his breathing fully evened out.

By the time he'd finally returned, everybody was packing up and saying that they'd pick up again tomorrow.

Richie figured that he should probably talk to Eddie about what had happened. He was still working on the whole *being emotionally vulnerable thing*, but sharing his deepest, innermost fears was significantly easier when he was speaking with Eddie, since Eddie was somebody who knew most of them already.

He thought that they would talk about it when he got home, but as soon as he walked through the door Eddie had just finished making dinner, and Richie didn't want to ruin their meal. Richie would have done it afterwards, but it was a Monday night, and Richie *certainly* didn't want to ruin *The Bachelor*, so he put it off again.

After the show had ended, Eddie had started being extra touchy and affectionate, and Richie concluded that it wouldn't be very sexy of him to discuss his issues with self-loathing and internalized homophobia right before they Got Freaky, so again, he'd pushed it to the back of his mind.

They were lying next to each other, still coming down from their respective orgasms when Richie said, "That was pretty fucking great, roomie."

Eddie looked over at him and raised an incredulous brow. "I'm sorry – *what* did you just call me?"

"I mean, we *are* roommates, aren't we?" Richie asked, fleetingly thinking of a meme that Aaron had showed him once.

Eddie had only stared at him. "Okay *bro*, I'm going to go and take a fucking shower."

"Wait—wait," Richie said, grabbing at Eddie's arm as he started to get up. "Okay, sorry. I'm doing that thing again."

“What thing?” Eddie asked.

“The thing where I try to deflect my emotions in, like, a self-deprecating way. You know, so I don’t have to let anybody else in?”

Eddie blinked, then broke into a small smile. “I guess we know that therapy is going well.”

“It is,” Richie nodded. He had been visiting his new therapist, Michelle, ever since he had gotten back to LA from Derry. It was Michelle who had been able to help Richie sort through his feelings for Eddie in a healthy way. She wasn’t afraid to call Richie out on his bullshit – and she also wasn’t afraid to tell Richie *exactly* what the fuck was wrong with him.

“So what are you deflecting, roomie?” Eddie asked, propping himself up with an elbow.

“Yeah... so, uh,” Richie felt his cheeks going red. “So something happened at work today.”

“Well I knew that,” Eddie said, rolling his eyes. “You sounded pretty fucking out of it over the phone. For a second, I thought you’d had another psychotic breakdown.”

“Very funny. The gossip magazines would love that,” Richie muttered. “Seriously, though. Something really... weird happened.”

“What was it?”

“You can’t be mad,” Richie said. “You have to promise that you won’t be mad.”

Eddie frowned. “What happened, Richie?”

“It’s nothing *bad*. Or, at least, not whatever you’re probably thinking now,” Richie said, shaking his head. Eddie looked like he relaxed slightly. “I just – I think I might have had a panic attack? Or something?”

“Wait, seriously?” Eddie asked, eyebrows furrowing. Richie figured that if anybody had known about panic attacks, it was Eddie – he’d

been having them for his entire life, except for the fact that when he was a kid, they had been disguised as *asthma attacks* by Eddie's mother. Richie still saw Eddie deal with them – not with the frequency that Eddie had as a constantly scared little boy, but whenever he'd wake from one of his night terrors or see something that had reminded him of Pennywise. It was seeing Eddie go through it that had made Richie be able to identify what had happened today as a panic attack.

Richie thought that otherwise, it would have probably been a hundred times scarier.

"I'm pretty sure that's what it was. It was really freaky."

"Yeah, it is," Eddie said as though he may as well have been saying *duh*, but he'd also had a lot of sympathy in his voice. "It feels like you can't breathe and you're going to die. Why would I be mad at you for *that*?"

"That wasn't the being mad at me part," Richie said hesitantly. "The being mad at me part is kind of what caused it to happen."

"You thought that whatever you did was going to make me so mad that it gave you a panic attack?"

"No, I –" Richie pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm saying this all wrong." He took another breath and tried again. "When you called today, Asshole Aaron asked me who was calling, and I told him that you were my roommate. Not my boyfriend, but my roommate. I really fucking wanted to tell them, but I couldn't get the word *boyfriend* out. I just couldn't tell them for some reason."

"Oh," Eddie said shortly. "Is that it?"

"Well, yeah," said Richie, trying and failing to analyze Eddie's tone. "Not entertaining enough for you?"

"No, it's just— that's not a big deal at all," Eddie's voice sounded strangely soft. "You don't have to worry that I'll be mad at you for shit like that. You've been through a lot concerning... you know, *us*. Your sexuality. I mean, we both have. I don't blame you for not

wanting to like, have an impromptu coming-out party with your coworkers – most of whom you don't even *like*," Eddie said. "It's nobody's business but ours, right?"

The words were affirming in a way that Richie hadn't even known that he'd needed until this moment. It felt like a relief, like a warm bath after getting caught in a rainstorm. But a part of him still felt guilty.

"I *want* to tell people though," Richie said, gazing at Eddie. He thought, who *wouldn't* want to tell the world that they'd somehow gotten such a spectacular person to fall in love with them? "I hate how there's a part of me that still feels so ashamed."

"Well then, let's work on it," Eddie said simply. "I know how it feels to be ashamed – have for my entire life, actually. It's not fucking fun. We deserve a break."

"Okay," Richie said. Eddie was completely right – feeling bad for yourself was exhausting, more-so maybe than a full time job (or writing a shitty fucking comedy sketch). Getting rid of those feelings would be a welcome change.

As Eddie had relaxed beside him, nuzzling his face into the crook of Richie's neck, Richie decided that he was going to fix this – he just needed to figure out how.

A day later, Richie had the perfect opportunity.

He'd just gotten finished with work (which hadn't gone significantly better than it had been for the past few days – the rest of the writers kept trying to *tweak* Richie's last bit, and by tweak, they were trying to fucking ruin it and make it completely unfunny. They'd spent a significant amount of time arguing about it, and almost everybody in the room took a turn dramatically stomping out at one point or another).

Usually, when he got out of work he could just walk home – that was one benefit of being temporarily located in New York City, he'd

thought. Tonight, though, it was fucking freezing cold – which was the most major *detriment* of living in the city (which was why Richie had moved to LA to begin with. The moment that Eddie could find a job on the west coast they were so moving back there) – so Richie decided to call an Uber.

Five-to-ten minutes later when the car pulled up for him, the first thing that he'd noticed was the rainbow sticker on its bumper.

As he got into the car, he was greeted by a blue-haired, nose-ring-wearing, semi-gloomy looking girl who his app had told him was named *Faith*. Her bag was sitting on the passenger seat, and it was covered in pins – most of which were either rainbow or had a “=” symbol on them and generally just conveyed the same message – and the message was quite *gay*, if Richie did say so himself.

It occurred to him in that moment that this girl would not care at all if he'd mentioned his boyfriend; in fact, he thought, she might throw him a fucking celebratory party. So while this wasn't an ideal circumstance by any means, the risk had certainly seemed minimal – Richie thought that, maybe, he could use her as *practice*.

The problem was, this girl did not seem one for conversation or small talk – like, at all.

“Traffic's not too bad tonight,” he'd said, only to be met with a grunt.

“It's fucking freezing outside,” he had also tried, to which she'd responded, “Then buy a coat.”

He knew that he was just psyching himself out. Honestly, a lukewarm reaction to something like this may have been the goal – Richie wasn't entirely sure. Did he even *want* strangers to be enthusiastic when he came out to them? Or did he just want it to seem like it wasn't a big deal?

Richie was shocked at how little thought that he had actually put into this.

He sat back in silence for a few minutes as he ran his next line through his head.

My boyfriend's going to be pissed that I got home so late. It sounded good in his mind – cool, casual, but maybe a little bit mean? He didn't want to give off ball-and-chain vibes. That sort of shit was reserved for miserable straight people.

He could make something up – *my boyfriend usually drives me home from work* – but he wasn't sure if that sounded stupid or unnatural. Something like *I had to borrow money from my boyfriend for this Uber* sounded even more awkward.

Richie took a deep breath. He had to get a grip; he was gravely fucking overthinking this.

He eventually decided on *I hope that my boyfriend is still awake when I get home.* It was honest, precise, and unassuming. He repeated it in his mind approximately 18 times, anally making sure that it was worded exactly how he wanted it, before getting the nerve to actually say it out loud.

As the Uber turned down his street, he figured that it was now or fucking never.

He took a deep breath and felt a stir in his stomach as he said, "I hope that m—"

"Wait-wait-wait," blue-haired chick interrupted. "Hold the fuck on. That *voice* – I know where I recognize you from. Are you that Richie —Richie, um—"

"Yeah I am, unfortunately," Richie deadpanned, still feeling his pulse thrum in his ears despite not actually getting to say anything important.

"Fuck, I see gifs of you on Tumblr all the time," the girl said, as she parked in front of Richie's apartment building. She was smiling now, but in a vaguely ironic way that reminded Richie of Aaron. "Your shit is pretty terrible."

"Thanks," Richie said abruptly, grabbing his bag and opening the car door. "Your driving is shit too."

She gave him the finger as she drove away.

Well, Richie thought, *that fucking sucked*.

After he'd gotten inside, he told himself that it was probably better that he hadn't said anything to her anyway. If she was a fan – or whatever the hell that she was – it could have only been a matter of time until she'd let it slip to somebody and the word got out to the public.

That wasn't sounding so bad at the moment, though. Trying and failing to come out to a miserable Uber driver was one thing – the thought of having to come out to every new person that he'd met for the rest of his life sounded *exhausting*. The only perk of fame (and random people knowing all sorts of personal shit about you) must have been that it would make stuff like this a little bit easier.

The tradeoff, of course, was having his middle-school bullies re-personified in the form of thousands of anonymous strangers on the internet and in the streets, sitting and waiting to call him every bad name in the book.

Riche slipped off his shoes at the front door – something that he'd never done in his fucking life when he'd lived on his own, but living with Eddie and hearing him preach the importance of performing basic cleanliness habits made certain things feel less and less like chores to Richie as the days and weeks passed by.

He had to admit that having a sink that wasn't full of dishes and having his laundry folded and in his drawers was actually pretty nice.

As he headed upstairs, he found that Eddie was, in fact, asleep already. Richie stripped down to his boxers and a t-shirt as quietly as he could before he laid down next to him.

Richie thought that Eddie must have showered before bed, because his hair was still slightly damp and smelled like peaches. Richie slipped an arm around Eddie and pulled him closer, causing him to stir slightly.

"Richie?" he asked sleepily.

"No, it's Brad Pitt. I decided to slip into your bed and spoon you in

order to test your devotion to your boyfriend,” Richie murmured.

Eddie flipped over so that he was facing Richie and gave him a lazy smile. “You’re not going to like the outcome of that one.”

“Can’t say I blame you,” Richie sighed. “He and I may be equal both in looks and dick-size, but he’s definitely got more money – and you always *were* a gold digger.”

“Shut up,” Eddie responded affectionately, bringing a finger up to meet Richie’s lips and silence him. “How was work?”

“We can talk about it later,” Richie said softly, both wanting to spare Eddie the details and genuinely not wanting to get into it. He wasn’t expecting this part of the writing process to be easy, but he certainly didn’t think that it would be so emotionally draining. “Go back to sleep.”

Eddie nodded slowly and closed his eyes. “Glad you’re home,” he said against Richie’s chest. “Hate falling asleep on my own.”

Richie pulled him closer and placed a soft kiss at Eddie’s temple. The whole thing felt surreal to him for a moment, and he wanted to pinch himself to make sure that he wasn’t dreaming, and that he hadn’t actually just fallen asleep in a shitty high school class and fantasized that he was spending his life with his dream man.

Sometimes he couldn’t believe that he’d actually gotten to have this.

He wondered absently if the bullies at school would have bothered him so much as a kid if he had been able to spend those years with Eddie in his arms.

When Richie ran into an old college friend at one of his favorite coffee shops, he knew that this was his chance.

His name was Ryan, and since he and Richie had both been drama majors, they’d shared dozens of classes together throughout school. They’d never been, like, *extremely* close or anything, but sometimes during college they’d get together to smoke weed and talk bullshit

about who in their latest production of *Hairspray* had sounded pitchy or was acting like a diva.

Best of all, he'd known for a *fact* that Ryan had been dating some dude named Alex at some point during college. Or maybe they'd just hooked up. Or... Ryan thought that Alex was hot? It didn't matter – Richie was fully prepared to tell Ryan all about his boyfriend.

"Jesus, Tozier, how long has it been?" Ryan asked, slapping him on the back a bit too aggressively for Richie's liking.

"Too fucking long, man," Richie agreed.

"And you're actually like... famous now and shit? Can't believe you really did it," Ryan said, grinning. "I never thought you were that funny."

"Fuck you too," Richie laughed. "Seriously, dude, how have you been?"

This was part of Richie's plan: He would ask Ryan how he was doing (check) and the two of them would exchange small talk about Ryan's life for a few minutes. Then, as politeness dictated, Ryan would logically ask Richie how *his* life was going, at which point he would drop the bomb:

I'm doing great! Finally got a boyfriend, thank fuck. Was starting to think that would never happen.

Seriously, dude? That's awesome! Do I know him?

Nah, he was a friend from fucking middle school. Guess pining over the same person for your entire life pays off after all, huh?

As fate would have it, however, that was not what happened.

"How have I been?" Ryan asked, the smile melting from his face. His voice and demeanor changed instantly as he said, "I mean, uh, my divorce proceedings are starting to go underway."

"Oh shit, man. I'm sorry to hear that," Richie said, feeling slightly uncomfortable. He hadn't even known that Ryan had gotten married

in the first place. Richie was starting to think that he probably should have made a Facebook account when his manager had nagged him to do it.

“Yeah, it’s been really fucking hard,” Ryan sighed, and Richie noticed a tremble in his voice. “She took everything. My house, the dog... our kids.”

“Fuck,” Richie suddenly felt desperately like he should find a way to retreat. There was no way that he could brag about his relationship while this dude’s life was in complete shambles – Richie thought that he would just take the loss on this one.

“Her lawyers were able to do it all because she told them that I have a drug problem. Which I totally *don’t*,” Ryan sniffed. “Or, well, I kind of do, but I could get that shit under control whenever I want to, you know?”

“Yeah, totally,” Richie said, trying to back away slowly. “Listen man, it was so good to see you, but –”

“Hey, do you want to get a bite to eat or something?” Ryan asked hopefully. “It’s been so long since I’ve had somebody to talk to. All of our friends have taken her side, and my family isn’t speaking to me because they think I’m responsible for them losing their grandkids or something.”

“Oh shit. God, I’d love to, but –”

Ryan’s eyes were watering now, and his lower lip was wavering. “Please man? Just a quick lunch?”

“Sure,” Richie relented, cursing himself for not being a bigger asshole. “There’s this burger place a block over that I like to go to with my b—”

“No, man, don’t worry about it,” Ryan interrupted, looking immediately cheerier. “Let me call a cab. There’s this vegan restaurant across the city that has some killer Irish moss green smoothies and flax seed whole-grain cookie-patties.”

“Sounds great,” Richie said weakly as he followed Ryan out of the

shop.

“You ate *what?*”

“It was, uh... beluga lentils with mung bean sprouts?”

“What the fuck even is that?” Richie heard Eddie laugh on the other end of the phone.

“I have no idea.” Richie felt his stomach growl – the entire dish had been about the size of an apple and had cost him twenty dollars and ninety-five cents.

“But you’re the one who ate it! How could you not know what it is?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t paying that much attention to it,” Richie sighed. “The dude was basically sobbing the entire time. It’s hard to focus on fancy vegan bullshit when a guy you barely know is telling about how he can’t even jerk off without thinking about how he ruined his life.”

“Sounds sexy.”

At that moment, Richie felt the cold wind blow through him, making him shiver. He’d taken an Uber back across town to get home, but once he got there, he realized that he had to run to the ATM to make a deposit before the tour kicked off. He had been putting it off for a few days, and he figured that since he was already out he may as well make the trip now.

“Seriously, it was fucking miserable.” Richie balanced the phone between his cheek and his shoulder as he zipped up his coat. “Makes me feel even worse about all the shit that you had to deal with in your divorce.”

He had always felt bad about what Eddie had gone through with Myra – it was just that he was too busy being fucking *ecstatic* that the divorce was happening in the first place to be able to muster too much guilt.

But all of the shit that Ryan had been telling him – with the lawyers, the trials, the division of assets, the fucking paperwork – it sounded like hell, and Richie didn't think that he ever fully expressed how much he appreciated all of the bullshit that Eddie had to go through so that the two of them could be living in *Domestic Bliss*.

"I've told you before, it wasn't *that* bad," Eddie said. "I mean it was fucking terrible, but – like, we did have a pre-nup, so that was easier. Plus, at the risk of sounding like a Hallmark card, knowing that I got to be with you at the end of it made all of the bad shit... worth it, you know?"

Richie felt slightly embarrassed by how warm that had made him feel. "Hell, why don't they actually make Hallmark cards like that? Like, *Baby, I love you so much that you're worth leaving my wife and going through extensive divorce proceeding for*. Let me tell you, that shit would fucking sell."

Eddie laughed again. "I mean I wouldn't *recommend* it. It's only advisable under, ah, extreme circumstances."

"That might be the sweetest thing you've ever said to me," Richie grinned. "I promise right now that I'll never divorce you."

"Okay, first of all, if that were how it worked, nobody would ever get divorced – but I appreciate the sentiment," Eddie said. "But second of all, we couldn't get divorced anyway since we're not even fucking married!"

"Trust me, I'm working on it," Richie said, subconsciously glancing at his left hand. "But I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you. It took me, like, thirty years to even get the courage to ask you out. Asking you to marry me has got to be at least double that."

"You say that, but I was the one who *waited* for you for thirty years. Trust me, I could do sixty more no problem."

"We'll be the hottest newlyweds in our retirement community," Richie agreed. It was a joke – of course it was a joke, but the underlying truth to it made him feel lighter than air.

Hating to change the subject but wanting to get out of the cold, he said, “Actually, babe, I’m at the ATM outside of Nordstrom right now. Did you want me to run in and get anything for you while I’m here?”

“No, actually, *I* don’t need anything,” Eddie said, and Richie knew from his tone that he was about to get a lecture. “But get yourself a better coat and, like, a hat and gloves before you get fucking pneumonia.”

Richie self-consciously tugged at his North Face jacket. It *was* pretty light.

But still, “I’m going to be touring the country in a few days. I highly doubt everywhere is as cold as this fucking city.”

“Yeah, some places will be way worse,” retorted Eddie. “Or did you forget that we literally grew up in fucking *Maine*.”

Richie wishes that he could forget – winters in Maine haunted his nightmares. He was definitely made for LA weather.

“Okay, fine,” he said. Then, after thinking for a moment, “It just feels so weird that this tour is actually happening. I feel like I’ve been anticipating it for so long that it just – doesn’t really feel real, I guess.”

“Don’t remind me,” Eddie sighed. “I’m going to miss the hell out of you.”

“Well, luckily we still have a few more days to live in denial about that,” Richie said, feeling an ache in his chest. He’d had twenty-seven years of missing Eddie – or, not necessarily him, but the *feeling* of Eddie that didn’t have a face or a name. He’d been able to be relatively fine back then, but now that he had Eddie back he couldn’t stand the thought of missing him again.

“Yeah, *luckily*,” Eddie laughed, but it sounded somewhat hollow.

“You know, it’s not too late for you to quit your job and just come with me,” Richie said, knowing already that Eddie wasn’t planning on changing his mind.

“Right,” Eddie scoffed. “And do what? Be your groupie for the next few months?”

“Somebody has to, since your mom isn’t around to do it anymore,” Richie joked, not wanting to sound too vulnerable.

“Fuck off,” Eddie laughed. They both stayed on the line for another moment, sitting in silence together, before Eddie said, “I should probably let you go so don’t freeze your fucking ass off, though.”

“Alright,” Richie said, still feeling an ache. “I’ll see you at home.”

Right before he was about to hang up, Eddie added, “And Richie?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Richie wasn’t a fan of Nordstrom.

It was a store for people richer than the clientele of Macy’s but who were too poor to seek out the items that they wanted in a boutique—it was *Yacht Mom Chic*.

The worst part was the salespeople. Richie wasn’t sure if they were paid on commission, but he’d be damned if they didn’t approach him *constantly* with enormous white smiles and unblinking eyes to ask if he needed help with anything.

Richie understood – really, he did. He worked in retail for about a month in college before he’d gotten fired for telling a customer to “fuck off” because he wasn’t able to process a return and they had gotten ornery about it. It had been well worth it, he’d thought regardless, and managed to avoid customer service jobs ever since. He felt incredibly lucky that his current job basically *encouraged* him to be an asshole.

That didn’t make it any less frustrating that he couldn’t pick out a

coat and gloves without *six* employees coming up and nagging him. They had all been perfectly polite, but all that Richie wanted to do was buy the cheapest coat that he could find that would still make Eddie happy and then promptly fuck off.

Once he'd settled on something – something so obnoxiously puffy that Richie was concerned that he'd look like the Michelin Man if he ever actually wore it – he lugged it, as well as a few other winter essentials up to the cash register.

The woman who was ringing him up (whose nametag read *Valerie*) looked just like everybody else that he'd spoken with so far, with wide eyes and a fake smile. While she was in the middle of scanning Richie's gloves and scarf, she'd commented, "It's a little late in the season to buying all of this, isn't it?"

Richie wasn't sure whether he should be offended or not. It was a harmless comment, but it had definitely seemed vaguely *judgmental* to him. It's not like it was her business if Richie wanted to buy a coat in January or late fucking June.

He wouldn't have even been buying any of that shit if it weren't for Eddie.

But that was when it hit him:

He was speaking to a customer service employee who was quite literally being paid to be nice to him, and *his boyfriend was making him buy the coat*.

Richie was suddenly overwhelmed by excitement. He thought that he may have been getting vocal blue balls, or whatever the equivalent was when you really wanted to say something but hadn't had the chance to express it.

Valerie was still scanning when Richie said, "Do you think so?"

She had only smiled back at him robotically and said, "Maybe a little bit."

"Well you're right. I think so too," Richie said.

Then he inhaled.

Exhaled.

"I'm only buying it because my boyfriend wanted me to."

Valerie blinked at him. "I'm sorry?"

"I'm only buying it because my boyfriend wanted me to," Richie repeated this time, more slowly. "He said that the coat I have now, uh, is a piece of shit and that I should get a new one."

"Well, if he suggested that you come here to buy it, he must have excellent taste," Valerie said cheerfully.

"He does," Richie said, feeling his heart racing but somehow also feeling uncharacteristically light. "I don't know what I'd do without him. I swear he's ninety percent of the reason why I even make my bed in the morning or, like, shampoo my carpets and shit."

"That's so sweet," she cooed. "Would you like to open a store credit card with us today and save —"

"No thank you."

Richie realized that this cashier thing was a fucking revelation.

After he had finished up with Valerie, he'd gone to *four* other registers with whatever shit he could find just to have the excuse to make boyfriend-related small talk. So far he had blamed Eddie for his purchase of a set of luxury bath towels (*my boyfriend won't use anything that's not one-hundred percent cotton*), some sort of Korean skincare set (*my boyfriend still gets breakouts, but he'd kill me if he knew I told you that*), and a personal back massager that Richie was pretty sure wasn't a sex toy, but he couldn't be fully certain (*my boyfriend loves massages, if you know what I'm saying. No, really, he has to sit at a desk all day and his back gets really stiff*).

He *almost* blamed Eddie for a new wastepaper basket for their upstairs bathroom until he took it up to the register and learned that

it was *six hundred fucking dollars* (my boyfriend would quite literally murder me if I spent that much on something that'll just sit next to us while we take a shit.)

He was in the middle of his sixth transaction (an engravable money clip – *this reminds me of a standup routine my boyfriend made me watch once*) when he was recognized.

"I'm so sorry if this is rude," said the middle-aged sales associate named *Melanie*. "But are you... Richie Tozier?"

"Yes," Richie said, feeling an ache in his stomach. It was moronic, he supposed, to assume that nobody would recognize him at all. It wasn't as though he were, like, an A-List celebrity or anything, but he certainly had a significant fan-base. He wasn't sure how this possibility had slipped his mind.

"That's so wonderful," she said, still beaming but looking more genuine than mannequin-like. Richie wasn't sure what was so *wonderful*, but he thought that he probably couldn't disagree more. "My daughter *loves* your routines! She quotes them around the house all the time – it's actually kind of annoying."

"Yeah, I've been told that before," Richie mumbled, wishing that she would just finish the transaction so he could get the hell out of there with his tail between his legs. He'd gotten too cocky, and it was going to bite him in the ass – all that it would take is for the slightest inkling of a rumor to spread for *everybody* to start speculating. Soon, he'd get asked if he was gay in interviews and have to take fake dates to red carpet events if he didn't want to be outed. The thought sounded dreadful and *exhausting*.

"I had no idea that you had a boyfriend. I don't think that my daughter did either," Melanie said. Richie wanted to say *please don't tell her – or anyone, for that matter* before she continued, "You would be such an inspiration for her."

Richie blinked. "What?"

"My daughter's gay too. She's been having a bit of a tough time in school lately," said Melanie, her expression souring. "You know how

kids can be so mean.”

The face of Henry Bowers automatically flashed in Richie’s mind, but he was just the start of it – countless kids throughout Richie’s childhood had been cruel and had pushed him around. Whether it was calling him gay, or calling him four-eyes, or calling him fucking *Bucky Beaver*, it hadn’t hurt any less. Richie could feel it almost as profoundly now as he could when he was getting the shit beaten out of him.

“Yeah, I know how kids can be.”

Melanie smiled again. “For her to see somebody like you – what, with how famous you are, and funny, and talented – to see that you’re gay and have such an incredible life would mean the world to her.”

“Huh,” Richie said slowly. That thought had never occurred to him, either. “Well I mean – I’m glad, I guess. I’m happy to hear that.”

“It’s true. Your parents must be so proud of you. You seem like a wonderful boy,” Melanie said sweetly. Richie was thought that, just maybe, he was about to get into an in depth discussion with this random woman regarding parental issues before she said, “Would you like to sign up for a Nordstrom’s card today?”

“No thank you,” Richie said as he grabbed the bag with his money clip inside.

As he started home, a lot of things had occurred to him.

First, he realized that he *did* have a platform. Maybe somewhere in his mind he had been able to convince himself that he wasn’t really *that* famous, or that he really didn’t have that much influence. But now the realization was smacking him in the face: not only did he have fans, *followers* almost, but he had a wide audience that cared about what he said and thought.

Second, he wasn’t in high school anymore. There wasn’t any reason that should have come as a shock to him, seeing as he had graduated over twenty years ago, but a significant part of him was still carrying along the baggage that he had accumulated when he was a teenager.

It had been –with a few exceptions – the absolute *worst* part of his life, but he'd grown up and made it through. He wasn't a lanky kid who had to walk home from school constantly looking over his shoulder worrying that an asshole would jump out of the bushes and break his nose – not anymore. His life, like that sales associate had said, was pretty much incredible: he had his dream job, he found success, and he was with the love of his life.

Richie thought that, as ridiculous as it sounded, maybe he *could* be inspirational to teenagers who were struggling with their identities. He couldn't imagine how different that his life could have been if, as a closeted nerd in middle school, somebody that he looked up or admired to had the courage to be themselves unashamedly.

That had given him an idea.

He anxiously burst through the door to his apartment – the walk had admittedly been *much* more pleasant with an actual coat – to see Eddie already in the kitchen starting on dinner.

He gave Richie a once-over, looking amused. “Well, you sure look cozy.”

“I am, Eds. You’ve shown me the way,” he said, shrugging off his coat and throwing it on the coat rack. The sheer weight of the parka caused the rack to crash to the ground, and Richie struggled to pick it up with all of the bags in his hands.

“Wow, did you... go on a shopping spree or something?” Eddie asked. “I didn’t know we needed so much shit from Nordstrom.”

Richie set the bags down next to the door. “We didn’t, actually. It’s a long fucking story – a lot of shit happened today.”

He made his way into the kitchen and lightly pecked Eddie on the cheek. Richie thought that he may have loved this part of being in a relationship the most – sure, the sex was incredible (and he had been wanting to do it with Eddie specifically since he was old enough to come), but this actual offhanded tenderness, like holding hands when they watched TV or spooning in bed at night, was in a league of its own.

Eddie, however, only crinkled his nose. “Rich, your lips are so cold. I’m going to have to get you to buy a ski mask or something.”

“Sorry,” Richie grinned, not feeling sorry at all. “But like I said, this was a big day.”

“What’d you do?” Eddie asked, absently stirring a pot on the stove. “Other than buying half of Nordstrom, that is.”

“Okay, so I kind of, like... came out of the closet to a bunch of Nordstrom sales drones?” Eddie raised his eyebrows in vague-surprise, and Richie said, “No, really. They were like *here’s your overpriced luxury sheepskin soap dispenser* and I was like *by the way, I’m gay as fuck and have a boyfriend. I knew you were wondering.*”

“That’s... good?” Eddie said, sounding confused. “Why’d you do that?”

“Eds, I’m glad you asked,” Richie said. “Remember how, about a week ago, I wasn’t able to tell those ass-fucks at work that we were together?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I’ve decided that’s complete bullshit,” Richie said simply. “I’m not ashamed of you, not even a little bit. Even when I was a kid and was so far in the closet that I was basically in fucking Narnia, you were the one thing that I could never actually hate myself for loving.”

“Wow, Richie that’s literally like... The sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me in the weirdest context ever.”

“But it’s true!” Richie asserted. “I wasn’t ashamed of loving you then, so why the fuck should I start now? I keep thinking that, like, Bowers or someone is out there, just looking for a reason to hurt me and make me feel like shit. But you know what? I killed that motherfucker. I won – we both did.”

“We did,” Eddie nodded, and took Richie’s hand. “You’re so fucking right.”

In this context, Richie thought that it was ridiculous how much that

his secret had been weighing on him for his entire life. “So why should I let him, or any of the other assholes like him hold me back? They can stay mad about it, for all that I fucking care. I’ve spent thirty years hiding; I’m ready to win some more.”

Eddie gazed at him unblinkingly for a moment, and then broke into an enormous grin. “So what are you going to do about it?”

“I think...” Richie said slowly, thinking it over. “I think that I might do something kind of stupid.”

“How stupid?” Eddie asked, still smiling.

“Okay, well, first... are you okay with, like, a ton of people suddenly knowing that we’re together?”

“How many people?”

“Anybody with a Netflix subscription.”

“Richie, how are you doing?” asked Dave anxiously. He was speaking at a mile a minute. “Are you tired? Nervous? Stressed? Do you need me to get somebody to get you something?”

“I’m *fucking* great, Dave. The only thing that would make me better is if you keep *fucking* talking to me. You know how much I love our *fucking* conversations, Dave,” said Richie, scowling.

Dave stared at him for a moment, then forced a laugh. “Wow, Richie, you’re just too funny. Make sure you keep up that enthusiasm for the show tonight, buddy.” He patted Richie on the back. “You’re gonna knock ‘em dead.”

“Or make them wish they *were* dead,” Richie muttered to himself. He wasn’t sure why he was so anxious. He never usually got nervous before shows – Richie was a natural-born performer. Having an audience of people literally pay to hear him talk was a dream.

But then again, this wasn’t going to be any usual show. He thought that maybe they should have called this tour *Richie Tozier: Coming*

Out to a Theater Near You.

Richie started to feel nauseated and anxious, so he took a few deep breaths to calm himself down. Eddie had suggested it – *I think that may have been why my inhaler worked so well when I was a kid, you know? It wasn't actually real, but it forced me to take a minute with some deep breaths.*

It helped, but only a little.

Richie couldn't believe that he was actually fucking doing this.

His co-writers were surprisingly for it. Most of them had been supportive in a generic sort of way, like *we're all happy for you, man, we just want you to be happy*. Dave, as well as the Netflix execs, had been thrilled that Richie would be able to capitalize on a new audience. Aaron, weirdly enough, had been oddly sincere about the whole thing, in a way that made Richie regret the fact that he'd been making fun of him with Eddie on the phone just minutes earlier.

And Eddie was the most supportive of all. He seemed almost as though he was *expecting* this to happen, though Richie had no clue how he could have been since Richie himself hadn't even known that he was going to do it until it smacked him in the face.

Everybody who could have stopped him didn't.

So now he was up against his last line of defense: his own crumbling psyche.

Richie was ready for this—he was. Except, a part of him thought that he really wasn't, not at all. It was easy to talk a big game and say that you're done giving shit what people thought of you when it was all an abstract idea. But it's a completely different thing when you were facing thousands of judgmental eyes staring back at you, and only you.

He wanted so badly to talk to Eddie, but *Eddie* was in the audience – he had insisted on seeing Richie's first show of the tour (which kicked off in New York) from the audience instead of backstage. Eddie had reasoned that he's already seen Richie practice the routines so many

times in the mirror at home that he wanted to see what it would look like when it was all put together.

That, and Bill and his wife had come to see the show as well. Another one of Bill's books were being turned into a movie (Richie couldn't distinguish them in his mind anymore – they were all the same, with a bizarre supernatural plot and a fucking terrible ending) and the movie was being shot in New York.

Of course, they'd said, they had to stop by and see Richie's show.

Richie wasn't sure why that made him so much more nervous, but it did – *spectacularly* so. It should have made him happy, if anything, that he would have at least three smiling faces in the audience no matter what he did, but it had instead felt like an incredible pressure.

What if the audience reacted poorly?

The rational part of Richie's brain knew that this wouldn't be the case. They were in New York for fuck's sake, not small town Nebraska. If anybody wasn't okay with Richie's sexuality in this audience, they would keep it to themselves.

He was starting to regret forcing the audience to lock up their phones so that they couldn't record during the show. Richie didn't much care about the inevitable bootlegs of the trainwreck that was his life – what he *wanted* was to text his boyfriend.

"Five minutes!" One of the male stagehands called to him cheerily, and Richie thought that he seemed far happier than the occasion called for. Somebody had probably forewarned him that he should be extra nice because *the talent* was in a sour mood.

"Thanks man," Richie mumbled, despite everything not wanting to sound impolite.

"Oh, actually, I have something for you," the stagehand said, pulling an envelope from his clipboard. "Dave said that somebody brought this in for you. It's unmarked, though."

Richie took the card and examined it for a moment before saying, "Thanks again."

“No problem at all,” he replied valiantly. “Four minutes thirty!”

After he had left, Richie opened the envelope. On the outside, it read the word *Congratulations* in a fancy, golden font.

On the inside, in a familiar handwriting, it said:

Richie,

I just wanted to wish you good luck one last time before you go on, because I know that you're nervous as hell. Remember what you said to me a few days ago: this is your chance to finally win. You're doing this for all of the kids out there who feel confused and ashamed about who they are – like we were, just thirty years ago. You get to show them tonight that it can all end up alright in the end. How fucking incredible is that?

I know how cheesy this sounds – and I'm only saying this because I'm extremely proud of you, and you CANNOT make fun of me for it, but every morning that I get to wake up next to you feels like the biggest win of all.

Everybody is going to adore you and the show tonight. Stop freaking out.

I love you.

Eds

Like that, it was as though the nerves had melted away.

Richie was ready for a victory.

It was hot under the stage lights.

All that he had was a stool and a bottle of water, but it didn't feel like nearly enough – he thought that he needed an industrial strength air conditioner, even though it was in the middle of winter.

The show had gone spectacularly well so far. Richie had no idea how fulfilling that it would be to perform material that was basically entirely his own. Everybody had gone wild for it, with raucous and

deafening laughter at almost every line that Richie spoke.

He wasn't sure where Eddie and Bill were sitting, but it was better that way – assuming that they were laughing along with everybody else was easier than potentially facing the alternative.

Richie had gone through the entire show – he humorously described his first wet dream, some weird dude who stared at him on the bus, The Chinese Takeout Incident, and his distrust for almond flour as well as describing his *Breakdown* as well as he possibly could (which, it turned out, was not particularly well since he had to leave out everything about the fucking *clown*. The audience had still loved it, though).

But Richie was ready to get on with it.

“You guys have been an incredible audience tonight. Really, you have,” Richie said. “I’ve just got one more thing for you guys tonight before I go home and jack off.”

Everybody laughed. The air felt uncomfortably thick, and Richie tried his best to force it through his lungs.

“So I had my first ever panic attack the other day.” Richie was counting on the resulting “Awkward silence, love that.”

Laughter.

“But you guys are right. It’s so weird when people just drop shit like that on you. And it – and it always happens at the weirdest fucking times, right? Like you’ll run into somebody you haven’t seen a decade and they’ll be like *sorry to dump on you dude, but my wife just divorced me and took my cat, our beanie baby collection, and the kids... and yes, that is the order in which I prioritize them. What of it? What the fuck of it, man?*”

“Or – or just the other day, I was in line at the grocery store. And I get to the checkout and they’re like, *would you like to round up your purchase to donate to the Miracle Kids Love Fund Organization,*” Richie deadpanned. “Yeah, that’s my cashier voice, you like it? You know how much those motherfuckers always hate being alive. But anyway,

they asked me to round up my purchase, and of course I say no – and shut up, shut the fuck up, don't pretend you're better than that. If there's one central unifying factor in this life, it's that we can't bear to part with those extra few fucking pennies. There's no reason for it. It doesn't make any fucking sense. If they were clinking around in our pockets we'd be dying to get rid of them – but there's something about the cashier asking us to donate it that just makes us think *fuck the dying kids, I'd rather use this thirty-six cents to buy half of a Pez dispenser instead.* ”

“But... yeah, so where were we? I hate dying kids, and I abandon my friends when they need me the most. Yeah, that's about right – that's about right.”

At that moment, absently almost, Richie's eyes scanned the audience. They were difficult to see – the stage lights weren't just hot, but they were also quite blinding from where he was standing. But like a magnet, his eyes found Eddie in the third row on the left side.

He was laughing. Richie almost couldn't believe it – Eddie loved to tease him about how shitty his comedy was, though that *was* typically before Richie used to write it himself. Richie remembered back to when they were kids: Eddie always had been the one to laugh at all of the stupid shit that he'd say, even if he were telling Richie to shut the hell up in the same breath. And now, close to thirty years later, here he was – still Richie's biggest fan.

Richie felt like he'd already won.

“People love to make assumptions about you, you know? Like *that chick looks like an asshole* or *that dude looks like he watches The Notebook every night while eating raw cookie dough*. Yeah, I know, you guys are like *Trashmouth*, we know what fucking assumptions are. Fuck you guys, okay? This kid came up to me the other day and asked me what a videotape was. We're living in uncertain fucking times, guys, let me tell you. But yeah, assumptions. They're fucking terrible. That's the one thing about having a highly publicized mental breakdown – people stop fucking expecting anything logical from you. I could do whatever the fuck I want and everyone would be like *it's fine, just leave him alone, we're letting him do his own thing*. I swear, I could dye my hair blonde or go out on Times Square and lead a

flash mob with no fucking shoes on.”

Richie took a breath.

“I could probably even, like, come out as gay at forty years old during one of my shows, and people would be so confused that they’d probably even *clap* for me.”

There was a moment of silence, in which Richie swore that he couldn’t breathe. It had been an incredibly cocky move. He thought for a moment he might have to add an *or not* to the end of that statement.

But then the moment ended.

The entire theater erupted into nearly deafening applause, some giving him a standing ovation and others hollering loudly.

He felt lightheaded as he looked out into the audience. He wasn’t sure what to make of it; for his entire life, he had been told to hide who he was. There had been monsters and demons behind every corner, waiting for the exact right moment to pounce and make him feel afraid. Somehow, though, the world had changed and left Richie behind in its dust.

Richie thought about his thirteen-year-old self, getting his lunch tray knocked out of his hands as Bowers screamed in his face. He thought of himself when he was seventeen and he had to scrub magic marker off of his locker as the other kids at school gawked at him. He thought of running away from Pennywise, who’d known his secret and threatened to tell the world.

Well, the world sure as fuck knew now.

But as he thought about all of those times, he realized that the worst part had always been how he was watched distinctly by the judgmental eyes of people who had wanted to see him fall, to see him hurt, to see him *lose*.

Staring back into an audience who had just heard who Richie was completely, and who had still chosen to embrace him felt almost surreal.

He almost wished that he could show those past versions of himself somehow – tell him *see this? Things might hurt now, and you might even think about giving up, but here's the proof that everything turns out alright in the end.*

His eyes found Eddie again in the audience, who was beaming and cheering with the rest of them. *Everything turns out far better than alright.*

Richie broke out into a grin. “Thank you guys. Really, thank you. Thanks, yeah,” but they kept cheering. “Okay guys, calm down. I’m not that special.”

There was more laughter. Richie still had them in the palm of his hand.

“I’m not special,” he repeated. “I’m just your normal, average, middle-aged ex-closet case. It just took a hot fucking minute to stop being afraid. But if there’s one thing I want you guys to take away from this show tonight, it’s this: if I can change, then so can you. Oh, and round up your fucking purchases at the grocery store for god’s sake. Good night, New York.”

A mixture of laughing and applause followed him, the sound seeping through the walls and the curtains long after he’d walked offstage. Richie was suddenly eternally grateful that comedians didn’t do encores. Every inch of him felt completely exhausted, like he’d expended everything that he could have possibly given.

His manager was the first person to approach him, and he was wearing a shit-eating grin. “Richie that was one of your best performances to date. Seriously fucking funny, and I already knew everything that you were going to say.”

“Thanks,” Richie said passively, barely looking at him as he made his way to the dressing room. He needed to sit down and have a fucking drink of water or something.

“And that part at the end?” Dave said, obliviously following Richie’s path. “Let me tell you, that shit is gonna immortalize you. You thought you were famous before? You’re not going to be able to walk

your metaphorical dog without people noticing you.”

“Good, because obviously I did it for the fame,” Richie muttered, trying to say *go away*, *fuck you* without actually saying it.

As they walked into the dressing room, Richie plopped down on his couch.

He wasn’t sure why he still felt vaguely nervous. There must have been a part of him that was waiting for the other shoe to drop; he’d had the moment of euphoria, and now he was waiting for the anxiety and pain that followed, as they always had.

“Oh, and the way you –”

“Listen, Dave, can I have a fucking minute? I kind of just had a major life moment,” Richie snapped.

“Of course!” Dave grinned, undeterred. “You can have whatever the fuck you want, Richie. You better get used to it, superstar.”

As Dave left, Richie practiced his deep breathing in anticipation.

There was a part of him that wanted to think that *this all might just be good*. *There might be absolutely no catch*, but Richie wasn’t ready to believe it until he saw it.

Just then, there was a bang on his dressing room door. “I said fuck off, Dave.”

“Not Dave, and definitely not going to fuck off.”

Oh, Richie thought and scrambled to the door. When he opened it, “*Eddie*.”

Richie didn’t think that he could possibly be more relieved to see him. Eddie was wearing a coat that was almost as big as the one Richie had bought for himself, and it seemed to swallow him up whole and make him look particularly small. Richie wanted to take Eddie into his arms, but first he pulled him into the dressing room and closed the door behind them. “What happened to Bill and Audra?”

“They told me to tell you that they loved the show, but that they had to be up early tomorrow. Or... or maybe they needed to stop for dinner,” Eddie said hesitantly. “I actually wasn’t really listening too closely. As soon as the show ended I kind of scrambled back here as quickly as I could.”

“Fuck, how *did* you even get back here so fast?” Richie asked. There were these things called *security guards* who were there specifically to prevent seemingly random men from wandering backstage. Only a few people had even officially known that the two of them were dating, so Richie figured that he would have to be the one to find Eddie, not the other way around.

“Actually, Aaron let me past security. Can you believe that?” Eddie smirked. “Guess he’s not a total fuckwad, huh?”

Richie was surprised at how decent that Aaron had been. “Maybe he is good for something after all.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said breathlessly, breaking out into a massive grin.

“What is it?”

“I just –” Eddie started, but Richie didn’t get to hear the end of his sentence because just like that, Eddie was launching himself onto Richie.

Their lips met, sloppily at first, but they quickly settled into their usual rhythm. It wasn’t necessarily a *dirty* kiss, but Richie was glad that he’d closed the door behind them.

Or at least – Richie *thought* that it wasn’t a dirty kiss, but Eddie seemed to be determined to change that. Even though Eddie had to stand on his tiptoes to reach Richie’s mouth, Eddie was taking full control, pinning Richie against the wall and pressing their bodies together.

Richie’s breathing was labored against Eddie’s lips as said, “God, if I’d known coming out would get this kind of reaction out of you, I would have done it thirty years ago.”

Eddie pulled away at that, and stared at Richie with wide, loving

eyes. “Richie I – you just have no idea how proud of you that I am.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Richie mumbled, thinking that he may very well be *blushing*. Fuck, he didn’t need the affirmation, but it felt incredible nevertheless.

“*Really*,” Eddie pressed, taking Richie’s hand. “I know how hard that this was for you, and I just... I feel really lucky to have you right now.”

Richie could have laughed at that – he thought that, if anything, he was for sure the lucky one. “If I knew you felt that way I *definitely* would have come out thirty years ago.”

Eddie pulled a little farther back and stared at him for a few seconds. It made Richie feel vulnerable, the way that he always had when Eddie had looked at him, ever since he was a little kid. Eddie *saw* something in him that other people couldn’t – he recognized what Richie was feeling even when Richie wasn’t even sure of it himself.

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise when Eddie asked, “What’s wrong, Richie?”

To anybody else, Richie may have lied, but to Eddie he knew that it would be a complete waste of time. Richie laughed to himself sardonically, and almost felt embarrassed to admit, “Nothing... Like, literally nothing. I feel fucking amazing,” he shook his head in disbelief. “That’s not – *normal* for me – not when we’re talking about this kind of shit. I guess that I’m just... waiting for it to feel shitty again.”

Eddie looked a mixture of confused and sympathetic. “Richie... it’s *not* going to feel shitty again. That’s the whole point of this. It’s your new chapter.”

“I mean, that’s a nice thought, but it’s a bit wishy-washy, don’t you think?” Richie asked. He didn’t want to hear Eddie agree with him, but Eddie was usually his voice of reason – not the other way around. “It’s all fun and games until some asshole calls me names on Twitter or some shit and I go spiraling again.”

“Don’t you get it, though? It’s not like that at all.” Eddie was giving Richie a winning smile, one that made Richie almost want to believe what he was saying. “This was your chance to say that you don’t give a fuck about what people like that say anymore. Besides, didn’t you see the crowd back there? You have the whole fucking world on your side.”

“You think so?” Richie asked quietly.

“You finally win this time, Richie. For real.”

It felt like a weight had been lifted off of Richie’s shoulders. He’d been holding his breath, waiting to feel bad again, as if there had been any point to that at all.

He wasn’t sure if he fully believed it – for fuck’s sake, it surely had to take more than one great night to erase years of self-loathing. There was always going to be an outside world full of people who would say horrible things and kick him when he was down. It would be foolish to imagine that all of the hate in the world would disappear just because he’d wanted it to

But Richie couldn’t help looking over at Eddie – his *boyfriend* — who was still gazing at him like his world started and ended in that room where they were together.

He thought that the rest of the world could go fuck itself.

Richie thought that, maybe, he was finally starting to feel victorious.

Author's Note:

Thank you so much for reading!! As always, if you have a minute I would love to hear what you thought of it!

(also, If you're interested to hear from me in the future (or are just looking for more IT-related content) you can follow my IT-sideblog [@eddiesbootyshorts!!](#))